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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about the crucial nature of early literacy experiences in learning to read. Many types of story reading interactions could have an effect on the development of reading literacy. A study explored the kind of social interactions that foster children's individual development toward independent functioning, especially addressing the consequence of the teacher's story reading style on the memory and comprehension of young children, and what conversational attributes can be determined to affect children's memory and comprehension for stories. Participants were 24 Chicago public school children with a mean chronological age of 5.8; 38% were low income, while 17% were bilingual. Using three books by Mem Fox, three conditions (a control condition, a questioning condition, and a co-construction condition) closely mirroring the story reading styles to young children were tested. The study's data did show beneficial effects for intense one-on-one interaction between an adult and child over a story book reading. The interactions did facilitate the below average ability student's memory and comprehension for stories; these students, however, still recalled less and required more support in the form of prompting than did the average and above average ability students. Additionally, in answering the comprehension questions, the below average students generated fewer inferences and made more incorrect responses than did the average and below average students. (Contains 4 tables of data and 16 references.) (NKA)

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Under the Influence of Children: The role of Social Support in the Development of Comprehension and Memory in Young Children

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Given the widely held notion that adequate reading skills are fundamental to school success and that school success is vital to ensuring global competitiveness, it seems almost trite to draw attention to the importance of reading in improving educational achievement. Yet, it is an unfortunate fact that not all or our children become readers. Darrell Morris (1997) refers to the 75% - 25% problem in education. That is, approximately 75 percent of students in American schools learn to process print in such a way as to be at least functionally literate while approximately 25 percent withdraw from reading. Shocking drop-out rates in some areas of the country give evidence to the fact that all to often the percentage of those withdrawing from reading is far higher than 25 percent.

Much has been written and printed on the crucial nature of early literacy experiences in learning to read. Indeed, advice to "read aloud to children as often as possible," is frequently given to both parents and teachers. According to the report from the Commission on Reading, Becoming a Nation of Readers (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children" (p.23). However, is simply reading aloud to children enough? The answer is, "probably not." Teachers have been acting upon the advice to frequently read aloud to children for more than two decades. In spite of that fact, far too many of our students not only fail to become good readers, but fail to become readers at all.

The tacit model underlying the assumption that reading aloud to children facilitates their reading literacy development is that exposure to print under the direction and guidance of an adult leads to skill development and reading comprehension. However, almost every literacy event is co-constructed to some extent. That is, the event is mediated by adult intervention. This paper explores the kinds of social interactions that foster individual children's development toward independent functioning.

The Problem

Teachers have long been known to vary significantly in the ways that they structure their classes and the ways they seek to foster reading literacy. The change in many classrooms from structured basal text with accompanying phonics and comprehension workbooks to a more literature based curriculum could make their differences important to literacy development. Many types of story reading interactions could have an effect on the development of reading literacy. To put it succinctly, does the type of literacy experience during a story a storybook reading influence literacy development?

Dickinson and his colleagues (1994) identified three ways in which teachers of young children structure their story read aloud.

1. performance style
2. didactic approach
3. co-constructive approach

Questions Addressed by the Study

1. What consequence does story reading style have on the memory and comprehension of young children.

2. What conversational attributes can be determined to effect children's memory and comprehension for stories?

Methods

Subjects- Twenty-four children (15 female, 9 male) from a Chicago Public School participated in the study. Mean chronological age was 5.8 with a range of 5.4 to 6.3. Four of the children (17 percent) were classified as bilingual. Thirty-eight percent of the students were low income, defined in Chicago Public Schools as any child qualifying for the federally subsidized school lunch program. Four racial groups were represented with the following distribution, 37.5% African American, 29% While, 21% Hispanic, and 12.5% Asian.

Materials- Three books by the Australian author, Mem Fox (1983, 1985, & 1989) were chosen for the study. Each of the stories involves a relationship between a young child and an elderly individual, contain 45 sentences each, and have a high degree of picture to text correlation.

- Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge is the story of a small boy who has an unusual group of friends. The text tells us that he lives next door to an old persons' home and he knows all the people who live there. The illustrations make it clear that these people are his friends. Miss Nancy Allison Delacourt Cooper, Wilfrid Gordon's favorite person has lost her memory and he wants to help her find it.
- Possum Magic is the story of a grandmother possum who makes her granddaughter, Hush, invisible to protect her from snakes. Unfortunately, she can't remember how to make Hush visible again. Grandma Poss finally recalls that "people food" can work the magic necessary to regain visibility.
- Night Noises tells three parallel stories. The text and illustrations support the telling of a story about Lily Laceby in the here and now who sits by the fire dreaming. Unbeknownst to her, family and friends are sneaking up the garden path in order to give her a surprise birthday party.

Initial contact- In order to build rapport and to ensure that all the subjects had experience listening, responding to, and hearing the responses of others to high quality children's literature, the experimenter became the story lady three times per week for seven weeks prior to the beginning of data collection.

Design- Three conditions (varying degrees of interaction) closely mirroring the three story-reading styles evidenced by teachers of young children (Dickinson, 1994) were tested. The three conditions were:

- a contol condition modeled on Dickinson's performance style, in which the child has no direct conversational interaction with the adult reader beyond that of listening to the adult read the text;
- a questioning condition paralleling the didactic interactional style found by Dickinson in which the story is interrupted and the child is asked questions regarding the story content; (and)
- a co-construction condition in which the child and the adult interacting freely over the story text.

These conditions (reading styles presented by teachers in the classrooms of young children) were viewed by the researcher as three individual locations on a continuum in which varying degrees of social (i.e, instructional) support were offered.

In the control condition/performance style, there was no conversational interaction between adult and child beyond a literal reading of the text. The questioning condition/didactic style made use of a teacher directed conversation between adult and child in which the adult asked questions and the child furnished answers to those questions. The co-construction condition offers the only true conversational interaction between adults and children.

The study employed a modified Latin Squares design with repeated measures. The order of treatments and order of stories was counterbalanced across children. Every child listened to each story and completed two measures, (1) retelling the story, and (2) answering a series of comprehension questions. Adult - child interactions over the story text were tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Results

Story Reading Condition and Individual Difference

Recall and comprehension will be reported briefly to orient the reader. However, since this data has been reported elsewhere we will keep the report brief. There was no significant effect of condition on the mean percentage of spontaneously recalled clauses.

Table 1: Mean Percentage of Spontaneously Recalled Clauses for Each Condition

	Control	Questioning	Co-Construction
Mean	20.58	23.31	20.84
S.D.	11.78	12.04	9.89

$F(2, 46) = 79 \quad p = .46$

However, because reliable individual child differences in the data were found, an analysis of story reading condition and child ability was done. The children were divided into above average, average, and below average memory ability groups. To assess whether there was a memory ability by condition interaction on recall, the mean proportions of total clauses recalled per participant were analyzed as a function of each Condition and three levels of Memory Ability in a 3 X 2 Analysis of Variance. Condition was a within and Memory Ability was a between-subject factor. There was a significant difference in recall between Memory Ability groups ($F(2,21) = 42.82$, $p < .01$) as well as a significant condition by ability effect (4, 44, $p = .02$). An analysis of spontaneous recall indicated that there was also a significant interaction between Condition and Memory Ability ($F = 3.37$). Means and standard deviations are reported below.

Table 2: Mean Percentage of Spontaneously Recalled Clauses as a Function of Memory Ability and Condition

	Control	Questioning	Co-Construction
Above Average	36.69	34.54	27.49
SD	(7.19)	(11.24)	(8.73)
Average	23.93	23.40	26.70
SD	(3.43)	(3.61)	(8.33)
Below Average	14.20	19.68	20.30
SD	(6.40)	(10.40)	(7.89)

After retelling the story, each child was asked to respond to six How and Why questions. The comprehension questions were designed to collect the same kinds of information across all three stories. The number of comprehension questions answered appropriately and inappropriately after the children heard and recalled the story was found for each child. Appropriate question answers were divided into whether they were answered with text-based information, picture-based information, or an inference generated by the child that was explicit in the text or the pictures. The number of each of the four kinds of answers, inference, text, picture, or inappropriate, served as the dependent variables in the separate Analyses of Variance with Condition during reading and Memory Ability as factors. Means and standard deviations are reported in Table 3 on the following page.

Table 3: Means and Standard Deviations for Comprehension Questions

Text-Based Answers	**Listen only**	**Questioning**	**Co-Construction**
Above Average Mean	2.00	1.71	1.71
SD	(1.16)	(1.80)	(.76)
Average Mean	1.83	1.67	1.83
SD	(1.47)	(1.03)	(.75)
Below Average Mean	1.43	2.57	1.43
SD	(.79)	(.98)	(.79)
Inferential Answers	**Listen only**	**Questioning**	**Co-Construction**
Above Average Mean	1.43	1.71	2.57
SD	(.54)	(1.38)	(1.27)
Average Mean	1.67	1.83	2.00
SD	(1.03)	(.75)	(1.27)
Below Average Mean	.71	.71	1.43
SD	(1.11)	(.76)	(.54)
Incorrect Answers	**Listen only**	**Questioning**	**Co-Construction**
Above Average Mean	1.57	1.57	.86
SD	(1.13)	(1.27)	(.38)
Average Mean	2.50	1.83	1.50
SD	(.84)	(.75)	(1.05)
Below Average Mean	2.75	1.88	1.50
SD	(2.19)	(.64)	(1.41)

The kind of interaction over reading had a significant effect on increasing the number of appropriate inferences and decreasing the number of inappropriate answers ($F(2, 42) = 3.39$ and 3.75, $p < .05$). The condition during reading did not, however, affect significantly text or picture question answers for each type of question as a function of the three conditions during oral reading. As can be seen in Figure 1, inferences increased following Co-construction. Questioning reduced the number of inappropriate answers but less so than Co-Construction.

The effects of Memory Ability paralleled those for comprehension. As Memory Ability increased, so did the number of inferences ($F(2.21) = 4.49$, $p = .03$). As Memory Ability increased, the number of wrong answers also decreased significantly ($F = 3.48$, $p < .03$).

Conversational Analysis

Clearly, children of below average memory ability are facilitated in some way by social interaction during story book reading. What occurs during questioning and co-construction that facilitates memory and comprehension

for young students who may be struggling? We will report the conversational structure of the interactions below and then use examples from the interactions and the recall data to make a series of points regarding social interaction with young children.

Table 4: Adult and Child's Conversational Structure in Each of Two Socially Constructed Conditions

		Adult Data		Child Data	
		Co-construction	Questioning	Co-construction	Questioning
Initiating Questions	M	20.79	21.13	2.71	.54
	SD	(7.19)	(4.79)	(3.06)	(1.06)
T = .19, p = .85				T = 3.28, p = .01	
Initiating Statements	M	20.42	.42	7.08	1.92
	SD	(7.14)	(.93)	(5.34)	(3.19)
T = 13.61, p = .01				T = 5.34, p = .01	
Responses	M	28.04	22.71	23.13	25.54
	SD	(11.03)	(9.79)	(6.07)	(5.98)
T = 1.77, p = .08				T = 1.39, p = .17	
Answers own ?	M	.63	.00	.17	.04
	SD	(.92)	(.00)	(.64)	(.20)
T = 3.32, p = .01				T = .92, p = .37	
Adjacency Pairs	M	34.08	27.63		
	SD	(10.81)	(7.78)		
T = 2.38, p = .02					

There were no statistically significant differences in the number of times the adult asked initiating questions. The adult asked as many initiating questions in the co-construction condition as in the questioning condition. The adult did however make more initiating statements when in the co-construction condition (p = .01). A moderately significant trend was found in the number of times the adult responded to the child. The adult responded to the child's utterances more often when in the co-construction condition (p = .08). Although a very small category, the adult also answered her own questions more often in the co-construction condition (p = .01). The total number of adjacency pairs was greater in the co-construction condition (p = .02) indicating that more total conversation during which the adult and the child were both engaged about the same topic occurred during the co-construction condition. In terms of the children's contribution to the interaction, the children were significantly more active participants in terms of initiating topics of discussion during the co-construction condition than they were in the questioning

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condition. When in the co-construction condition the children asked significantly more initiating questions ($p = .01$) and made significantly more initiating statements ($p = .01$). In summary, the co-construction condition is characterized by more total talk and more active participation from the children.

There are three points that we will attempt to make with examples from the story reading narratives and from the student's story recall. These are:

1. Adults constrain as well as facilitate
2. The adult is constrained by what the child already knows and/or is able to respond to.
3. Both adult and child are constrained by the content of the story.

Adults constrain as well as facilitate- When discussing co-construction between an adult and child it is important to understand that in addition to facilitating understanding the adult is in some ways constraining the child during an interaction. As the adult shows, through words and gestures that which is appropriate, limiting the possible areas of response and signaling the child as to what s/he remember from the story. When the child begins to talk about issues outside the story, the adult gently guides her back to the story content. For example, Antoine noticed a skateboard in the illustrations of the book Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge, (Fox, 1985) and the following exchange occurred.

Antoine -	Could he ride a skateboard?
Adult-	Evidently.
Antoine -	I can't. Only I got to put it like this and make it go. (Antoine demonstrates how he uses one foot to balance and push himself along when he rides a skateboard.)
Adult-	Oh, you use one foot to push it along?
Antoine-	Yeah, I can't do it with two feet because I'm not pushing and I put on two feet I fall.
Adult-	Oh well. Let's watch Wilfrid Gordon and see what happens. What is he going home to do? Do you remember?
Antoine-	Uh huh. ---- To get everything that was a memory for that lady.
Adult-	Right.

In this exchange the adult responds to the child's question about the story illustration and briefly engages in a discussion about Antoine's interest in skateboarding. Very quickly, however, the adult guides the child back to the text and subtly signals that it is important for him to remember why Wilfrid Gordon went home (i.e., that Wilfrid Gordon's goal is to find memories for Miss Nancy.)

Renninger and Winegar (1985) coined the term differential constraining/ progressive empowerment to explain the phenomenon of adult constraint. Differential restraint refers to the adults' tendency to adjust both the amount and the type of constraint they provide in relation to their expectation of what the child can do. The constraint is differential since the adult can alter both the form and the amount of constraint based on the child's performance. Progressive empowerment refers to the increasing responsibility for performance demonstrated by the child.

As demonstrated by the previous examples of adult-child interaction, much of what a child says during the co-construction may, to an uniformed observer, appear pointless or even redundant, it is often neither. As Douglas Barnes points out in From Communication to Curriculum (1976), children's conversational interactions are a reflection of complex child thought. According to Barnes, the discussion that may appear to be loose, redundant, or pointless, are actually the way in which young children link ideas and "tryout" half formed thoughts. This trying out of thoughts allows the child to clarify his or her own thinking an extension of the old saying "I don't know what I think until I hear myself say it."

Michael Siegal refers to children's difficulty with conversational interaction as a "clash of conversational worlds." Siegal feels that children are both sophisticated and naive users of the rules of conversation. That is, they are sophisticated in terms of everyday, natural talk, but limited or naive in specialized settings. Young children do not listen to stories in order to be able to retell them later, nor do they interact with an adult over a story in order to be able to retell it accurately later. "They read (listen) to satisfy their pleasure-seeking narrative greed" (Watson, 1993, p.15).

Adults are constrained by children-

Gradually increasing independence on the part of the child is central to a co-construction model of instruction (Fivush, 1991; McNamee, 1987; and Rogoff, 1990. The child must do as much of the cognitive work as s/he is able. The ability of the child to do as much of the cognitive work as possible is an important area of inquiry that is not fully addressed in the social construction literature. As a field, we do not yet understand how a child's ability and willingness to participate affects the adult and thereby the quality of the interaction itself. Emerson (1983) came very close to addressing the problem when he wrote that a "Zo-ped is a dialogue between the child and his future; it is not a dialogue between the child and adult past." For example, the following exchange occurred during the comprehension questioning at the end of the adult – child interaction. The child was asked the question, "How did Grandma Poss finally remember the way to make Hush visible again?" The correct answer is that Grandma thought and thought and then finally remembered that it had something to do with people food. She then takes her granddaughter Hush on a trip around Australia to find the foods that would help her to regain visibility. This child has the order confused and is resistant to the adult's intervention which would help him to get the answer correct.

Adult- How does Grandma Poss finally remember the way to make Hush visible again?

Child- Cause she found him some people food.

Adult- Yes, she found people food after she remembered how to make Hush visible, but, how did she remember how to do it?

Child- No other way.

Adult- No other way? Remember she looked through her magic books and she couldn't find the answer so she did what all night?

Child- Nothing. She just found some food and that's how she knew how.

Adult- Remember--- the story says she thought and thought about how to do it------ Do you think she finally remembered after she thought and thought for a long time?

Child- Yeah --- she remembered cause she found the food.

Although very verbal, this child is firmly fixed on an answer that has some story elements embedded in it but is no-the-less wrong. Further the child is very resistant to adult intervention. The adult works very hard, asking a series of guiding questions, providing clues from the story, and finally providing the answer and inviting the child to agree. Unfortunately, the child is unable to make use of the scaffold the adult is providing. Therefore, the adult is constrained in this interaction.

Story content constrains and facilitates both adult and child- the text guides the responses of both the adult and child in the interaction and creates it's own context for the adult and children's story reading experience and for the children's recall. For example, in Possum Magic (Fox, 1983), the author has created text which transports adult and child from the reality of the classroom to a world where Grandmother possums possess the magic necessary to make wombats blue, kookaburras pink, dingoes smile, and emus shrink. The story creates a special context, a fantasy world which adult and child readily enter. Grandma is not described as a scavenger animal with a tail like that of a rat. Rather, Grandma Poss is portrayed in both the text and the illustrations as a caring grandparent who lobes her grandchild so much that she is willing to travel all over Australia in order to grant Hush's hearts desire. The story draws us into it's special context as the descriptions of settings and events unfold.

Fox creates a world in which both adult and child discuss a fantasy world as though it were real. No child leapt out of their chair to declare, "this is ridiculous, possums can't ride bicycles, nor can they make magic, turn invisible or travel all over Australia." Rather, the following exchange is typical. The text preceding the exchange was as follows, "because she couldn't be seen, she was safe from snakes, which is why Grandma Poss made her invisible in the first place."

(1)	Child -	I hate snakes.
(2)	Adult -	You do?
(3)	Child-	I have snakes in my backyard.
(4)	Adult-	Oh dear! Why did Grandma Poss make Hush invisible?
(5)	Child-	So she won't be seen by snakes.
(6)	Adult-	Right, and if they don't see her they can't bite her.
(7)	Child-	Un Uhh (negative sound, she is contradicting the adult).
(8)	Adult-	Sure ... look she's hanging on there, ...right over the snake's head.
(9)	Child-	Couldn't the snake ...and like...I see you?
(10)	Adult-	No ....she's invisible.
(11)	Child-	Says nothing but looks perplexed.
(12)	Adult-	She can't see her.

(13) Child- Well you can see her fur.

(14) Adult- Well, the artist did that in the book so that we could see her, so we would know where she is. But when you're invisible, you can't be seen.

Text- But one day, quite unexpectedly, Hush said, "Grandma, I want to know what I look like. Please could you make me visible again?

(15) Adult- See (pointing to the illustrations) she's tired of being invisible. She wants to be visible. She wants to be able to see herself.

(16) Adult- See, look what happens over here in the water. There is Grandma Poss brushing her teeth and she can see herself in the water. But what about Hush?

(17) Child- She can't see herself.

(18) Adult- How come?

(19) Child- Because she's invisible.

(20) Adult- Right!

(21) Child- Cause when you are invisible... you can't see yourself.

(22) Adult- Right!

In lines 1 and 3 of the interaction the child is trying to initiate a discussion on snakes. A snake appears in the story but it is not central to the plot. The concept of invisibility however, is crucial to story understanding. The adult in this interaction responds to the child's statement about snakes (lines 2 and 4) but quickly leads the child back to the story in line 4. In her response to the adult's guidance it becomes clear that the child is somewhat confused about the concept of invisibility (lines 7 thru 13). She may be confused by the content of the story illustrations or she may have been unsure of what invisibility means. In either case, her confusion was uncovered during conversation and dealt with quickly using adult explanation, story context, and illustrations to reinforce understanding.

Co-construction allows another form of comprehension, namely "relating new experiences to what is already known" (Smith, 1975; p.10). The activation and use of pre-existing schemata by the child might also increase comprehension and, possibly, memory for text. An example from the data illustrates this strategy. The text read prior to the exchange was, "Grandma Poss made Bush magic. ..... She make dingoes smile and emus shrink."

(1) Adult Where is the dingo?

(2) Child Points at the picture.

(3) Adult Yes, a dingo is a wild dog.

(4) Child I know because of the magic came down and he's smiling.

(5) Adult Ahh---I see. She made emus shrink.

(6) Child Here's an emu!

(7) Adult Ahh, yes. They look kind of like an ostrich; don't they?

(8) Child Yeah!

Using pictures and text as referents, the child explains that he knew which animal out of the four represented on the page was a dingo because the text said that Grandma made the dingo smile (line 4). He was able to match that bit of text to the smiling animal in the illustration. The adult reinforces the concept of dingo by relating it to something the child would know - dog that is wild (line 3). The adult uses the same reinforcement strategy in line 7 when she relates an emu to an ostrich.

Discussion

To paraphrase Orwell, "All children are created equal. Some are more equal than others." Traditionally in America, this has certainly been the case in terms of academic performance. Recently published studies on children's memory (Fivush, 1991; Fivush & Reese, 1992; Hudson, 1993, 1990) and comprehension (Kerr & Mason, 1994; Mcnamee, 1987; Morrow, 1987) reflect the belief that social interaction between an adult and a child has profound effects on the child. Further, some researchers have pointed out that students in lower ability groups are likely to receive the poorest teachers, the least varied teaching methods, and the most limited texts (Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 1985). The implication seems to be that if lower ability students had access to optimal teacher-student interaction and good texts, the gap between high and low ability students might not be so great. Fivush (1991) has attempted to make the same point in regard to parent-child data. She found that mothers differ in the narrative style they use when interacting with their children. She hypothesizes that these differences may be the reason for variances in children's recall ability.

We are not unsympathetic to the view that an adult can have a positive influence on a child's performance. However, educators need to understand the uses and limitations of the techniques we espouse and carefully consider the data before drawing conclusions. The data from this study does show beneficial effects for intense one-on-one interaction between an adult and child over a story book reading. Over time this intense interaction could serve as a powerful tool for enriching at risk students educational experience. The interactions did facilitate the below average ability student's memory and comprehension for stories, however, these students still recalled less and required more support in the form of prompting than did the average and above average ability students. Additionally, in answering the comprehension questions, the below average students generated fewer inferences and made more incorrect responses than did the average and below average students.

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